

Trauma and Stress in Young Children

Even when we try our best to protect our children, young children may experience stressful, scary, or traumatic events. In many cases, their caregivers experience these same stressful events alongside them. Babies and young children can experience feelings of stress and can have memories of stressful and traumatic events, even when they are too young to tell us about it. It is important to help young children with their feelings and experiences so that they develop coping skills and so that these experiences do not continue to impact them as they grow older.



What is stressful or traumatic to a young child?

- Sudden, unexpected, or frequent changes in caregiver, school, program, or home life
- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Witnessing the abuse of a loved one
- Neglect, feeling unloved or unprotected
- Community violence
- Death of a family member, friend, or loved one
- Separation from a caregiver or other important person (divorce, foster care, custody changes, hospitalization, incarceration)
- Experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia, or discrimination
- Mental illness and/or substance use by a loved one
- Accident, injury, or medical procedure
- Hospitalization or illness of self or a loved one
- Household conflict, verbal threats, physical fighting, violence
- Homelessness, or not enough money or resources for food or basic life necessities
- Natural disasters (fire, tornado, flood)
- Pandemic, global crises
- War, political violence

Children can respond to stress and trauma in many different ways. Some children might show a reaction to stress or trauma right away, and other children may only appear to show a reaction many months later.

Here are some behaviors that are common among young children who have experienced stress or trauma:

- Easily distracted, hard to concentrate or learn
- Hard time making or keeping friends
- Hard time transitioning from one activity to another
- Big feelings, crying or screaming a lot, hitting, kicking, pushing other people
- Hurting self or others
- Breaking things
- Hard time calming down
- Hard time falling asleep, staying asleep, or having nightmares
- Toileting problems, more accidents, or more difficulty with toilet training
- Loss of skills that they used to have (loss of language skills, clumsiness)
- Upset in noisy, crowded, or busy environments
- Being more quiet, withdrawn, or sad
- Being fearful, easily startled
- Acting out the trauma in real life or their play
- Acting different (big feelings, withdrawn, racing heart) around reminders of the trauma or avoiding reminders
- Less interested in play or social activities

If your child has experienced stress or trauma, here are some strategies you can try with them:

1. Acknowledge the stressful or traumatic experience

- Children remember stressful experiences even if they cannot tell you about it in words. Babies and young children might have a body reaction (racing heart, sick or worried feeling, aggression) when they are around something that reminds them of their traumatic or stressful experience. Children may also show their memories through play—they might play directly about situations that they experienced, or they might play about “themes” that relate to their experience (being trapped, feeling out of control, good guys turning into bad guys).
- When we acknowledge a child's scary or traumatic experience, it helps them to understand where their feelings are coming from. Talking about their experiences does not re-traumatize them, but instead it helps them to make sense of their reactions and feelings. Here's an example of what you can say:



“You remember when mommy went to the hospital and didn't come back for a long time. You felt very scared when that happened. This time is different--you're safe with your grandma right now, and mommy will be back this afternoon.”

2. Support play related to a child's stressful experiences

- Young children often work through their thoughts and feelings in their play. To help your child to use play to process and understand their experiences, try to have toys available to them that can be used for pretend play (toy people or animals, food, dress-up clothes, doll houses). These toys don't have to be fancy—you can pretend a box is a house, or you can draw objects on cardboard and cut them out.
- Try to have toys available that are related to the stress or trauma that your child experienced—for example, doctor toys for a child who had scary medical procedures, two houses for a child who moved homes, a police car and policeman for a child who witnessed violence. If your child's play seems intense or scary, or if their play is upsetting for you, please work with a therapist to help your family work through these experiences.



3. Help your child to talk about feelings

- Show your child that it's okay to talk about feelings by narrating your feelings and encouraging them to talk about theirs. When caregivers are having big feelings, they can model calming strategies. (*"I'm feeling angry right now, so I'm going to take 3 big deep breaths to help my body to calm down."*)
- Here are some ways to help your child find the right feeling words:
 - Make a list of emotion words together or draw about feelings. Think about how you feel different feelings (*"When I'm scared, my muscles get tight"*)
 - Think and talk about what feelings other people or characters have—it could be people in real life, book or TV characters, or anyone else.
 - If it's hard for your child to talk about their own feelings, try to explain why one of their friends, stuffed animals, or other characters feels the same way.

4. Use strategies to calm down

- When children are feeling upset, overwhelmed, or stressed out, calming strategies can help. But, for these strategies to "work" when a child is upset, it is important to practice them when your child is calm. Here are some ideas:
 - Take slow, deep breaths. (*"Breathe in like you're smelling flowers and breathe out like you're blowing out candles."*)
 - Name shapes that you can find around you. (*"The window looks like a rectangle"*)



- Count by 10s.
- Name an animal (or food, or thing in the room) for each letter of the alphabet, or for each color.
- Play with play dough, slime, or sand.
- Listen to music.
- See www.bit.ly/IECCAnxiety for a few more ideas!



Here are some parenting strategies that can be helpful for children who have experienced stress or trauma:

1. Take good care of yourself.

- In order to best support your child, it is important to take care of your own needs as well. Make time for activities that help you feel calm (exercise, listening to music, cooking or baking a favorite food, reading, spending time in nature). Try to make it a priority to connect with people who care about you and ask for help when you need it. If you are struggling with your own stressful or traumatic experiences, consider working with a therapist.

2. Understand your child's challenging behaviors as an expression of what they have been through.

- Young children who have experienced stress or trauma often have challenging behaviors. Sometimes challenging behaviors might happen when something reminds your child of a scary experience. Other times, children may feel irritable most of the time, and have outbursts about even little upsets. Children who have experienced a lot of stress are usually behind for their age in self-regulation skills. Young children aren't able to calm their feelings down on their own—they need a trusted adult to help them calm down. When your child shows challenging behaviors, remind yourself that they are having a hard time because of the hard things they have gone through, and it takes time to heal after stress.



**“When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it’s our job to share our calm, not join their chaos”
- L. R. Knost**

3. Create a predictable and safe environment.

- Familiar activities can provide comfort for children during challenging times. Similar to adults, children feel more confident and secure when their daily activities are predictable and familiar. This predictability may help them feel more in control of their environment, know what is happening next, and know what is expected of them.
- Try to keep daily routines consistent. When there are a lot of things changing, remind your child about what will stay the same (“We’re sleeping somewhere new tonight, but you still have your favorite stuffy, Ms. Sarah will still be your teacher at school tomorrow, and I’ll still pick you up at the end of the day.”).
- Emphasize that your job as the grown-up is to keep them safe and show this through your actions. Try to limit scary things in their environment (yelling, scary TV shows, loud noises, etc.).

4. Relationships help us heal.

- A child's relationship with trusted adults can be the best kind of "medicine" for stress and trauma. Spending quality time together can bring joy and comfort, and help us get through hard times. When children are having a hard time, they often show it with challenging behavior. One of the most effective ways to reduce challenging behavior is with daily special play time together where your child gets your undivided attention. This kind of play time usually helps caregivers to feel more connected and calm, too. Here are some tips to make play time most effective:
 - Be consistent - 10 minutes or more every day works best. Build it into your daily routine so it happens at the same time every day.
 - Follow your child's lead, and show delight in what they are doing. One way to do this is to use your words to describe what your child is doing in his or her play. For example, you could say “you’re drawing with the green crayon” or “you’re stacking the blocks and it’s getting so high!”
 - Give no instructions, criticisms, or corrections, and ask no questions. If your child does something you don't like, try to ignore it.



Check out this page for more resources on early childhood trauma:

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/traumatic-experiences/>